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Shultz Asserts Libyan Threat Has 'Receded'

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 20 — Secretary of State George P. Shultz said today that what the Reagan Administration believed last week was a military threat by Libya against the Sudan had now "receded."

Mr. Shultz said Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the Libyan leader, "is back in his box where he belongs" because President Reagan acted "quickly and decisively."

Another State Department official said that unless there was a sudden outbreak of violence in the region — a possibility that he said now appeared unlikely — four Air Force Airborne Warning and Control System planes sent to Egypt last week would be withdrawn Tuesday.

The Awacs were flown to the Cairo West airfield when intelligence reports aroused concern here, in Cairo and in Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, that Libya was planning to try to overthrow President Gaafar al-Nimeiry of the Sudan.

Mr. Shultz's statement today marked the first time a senior Reagan Administration official had said publicly that there had been any threat to the Sudan in the first place. President Reagan, who by law had to give his authorization for the dispatch of the Awacs to Egypt, said at a news conference last Wednesday night that the planes were in Egypt

for a "training exercise" and that they had been there "for quite some time."

But the next day a White House official said the planes had just arrived in Egypt and would stay for a limited period. Other officials said Thursday that the Awacs would be withdrawn in a matter of days unless Libya attacked.

In Cairo, the Egyptian Defense Minister, Lieut. Gen. Abdel Halim Abu Ghazala, said today that he was unaware of any Libyan military threat to the Sudan. But he said Egypt would "stand by the Sudan against any aggression that it might be subject to." Egypt has a mutual defense arrangement with the Sudan and is pledged to come to its support in case of attack.

In the Sudan, the official press agency quoted Information Minister Mohammed Osman Abusag as saying Libya was continuing to send troops and planes to the Kufra border region and to the Libyan-occupied Aozou and Largeou areas of northeastern Chad, near the Sudanese border.

U.S. and Egyptian Intelligence

Administration officials said the reports on the Libyan threat, from United States and Egyptian intelligence, were based on information supplied by agents in the region as well as gathered by electronic means. The reports said Colonel Qaddafi had authorized internal subversion, including a possible assassination attempt against President Nimeiry. They added that the carrying out of this plot was to be accompanied by air raids against the Sudan by Libyan planes based in southern Libya or northern Chad.

Senator Henry M. Jackson, Democrat of Washington, a member of the Armed Services Committee, said on the CBS News program "Face the Nation" today that Libya had moved 20 planes to the border area and that there was "ample evidence of an attempt to overthrow the Nimeiry Government and to assassinate the President."

Mr. Shultz, speaking on the ABC News program "This Week," said, "As far as we know, the threat that was clearly present has receded."

A State Department official said today that Tuesday was set as the tentative departure date for the Awacs because of the intelligence indications that the Libyans had called off any plans they might have had against the Sudan.

'Qaddafi Back in His Box'

Mr. Shultz, in his television appearance, said, "The President of the United States acted quickly and decisively and effectively, and at least for the moment Qaddafi is back in his box where he belongs."

His comments were in line with the White House effort Friday and Saturday to convince reporters privately that Mr. Reagan was actually in charge of the operation, even though at his news conference on Wednesday he made factual errors.

All last week officials at the Pentagon and the State Department were willing to talk of the "Libyan threat" only on the understanding that they not be quoted. When officials could be quoted they declined to talk of a Libyan threat, until Mr. Shultz's remarks today.

Mr. Shultz declined today to provide any details on what happened in the last week. But he did criticize Colonel Qaddafi for having tried to "destabilize" his neighbors for some time. "I expect that he will continue to cause trouble," Mr. Shultz said.

'His Options Are Limited'

"Our approach, I think, is to let him see that his options are limited and we know what's going on and to conduct ourselves accordingly," he said.

The Awacs were sent to Egypt, Administration officials said, to monitor any possible Libyan air attacks on the Sudan, so that Egyptian fighters could intercept the Libyans. The Awacs, in turn, were backed up by the Nimitz carrier task force, which had been moved from waters near Lebanon to the Egyptian-Libyan area. Pentagon officials said the Nimitz had returned to the Lebanese area.

The publicity given the sending of the Awacs in this country has caused some embarrassment in Egypt, where the Government of President Hosni Mubarak has sought to improve relations with other Arab countries and is reluctant to publicize its military ties with the United States.

Administration officials have said the Awacs were sent at the explicit request of President Mubarak, but Egyptian officials and news organizations have denied in recent days that any such request was made or that any threat to the Sudan exists.

The Libyans have denied any plans to attack the Sudan. The lack of any tangible threat from Libya was reminiscent of the Administration's problems in late 1981 when it aroused considerable agitation in Washington over reports of

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a Libyan "hit squad" being sent to the United States to try to kill high officials. Nothing happened, and it was unclear whether the publicity forced cancellation of the Libyan plans or whether the Administration's information was faulty in the first place.

Mr. Shultz, in comments on other matters, said that so far he had detected no willingness by Yuri V. Andropov, the Soviet leader, to work out problems in a constructive way. As to Mr. Andropov's proposal to keep 162 Soviet medium-range missiles in Europe while blocking deployment of any new American missiles, Mr. Shultz said mockingly, "If somebody had made that to me when I was a businessman, I would have said he proposed to give me the sleeves from his vest."

Shultz on Israel

The Secretary was asked about an interview published in The New York Times today with Moshe Arens, the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, who has been named Defense Minister.

Mr. Arens said that some Administration officials had "idealized notions" on how quickly a negotiated solution could be achieved for Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, and that too



United Press International

Secretary of State George P. Shultz during a televised interview yesterday in Washington.

much pressure was being placed on Israel.

Mr. Shultz said the United States had no problem with Israel's desire for security from southern Lebanon but said Israel's proposals for a permanent military presence in that region manning outposts was "hardly consistent with the idea of sovereignty for Lebanon."